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ABSTRACT

With a declining pool of youth to draw from, community colleges need to be concerned about what can be done to serve the needs of a burgeoning older adult population. Recent research on the educational needs of older adults reveals that they are interested in: (1) information on such personal business and financial topics as social security programs, pensions, consumer problems, and legal assistance; (2) full- or part-time employment in the fast food industry, computer technology, child day care services, telephone solicitations, and other areas; (3) remaining physically fit, mobile, and independent; (4) opportunities for social interaction; and (5) maintaining positive self-esteem and having a sense of purpose and meaning in life. The literature indicates that many community colleges are currently involved in meeting these needs directly and indirectly. Courses and workshops in retirement planning, housing choices, and financial security are common; job training programs especially designed for older adults are available at several community colleges; and efforts have been made at several schools to expand the traditional physical education curriculum and to attract older adults to dance exercise, swim therapy, and other courses that are suited to their needs. Enrollment in any college program, as well as in these specially designed programs can help older adults make social contacts, maintain their self-esteem, and awaken new interests. (WJT)

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OLDER ADULTS: COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS OF THE 1990'S

Societal Affairs Affecting Higher Education

by

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Older Adults: Community College Students of the 1990's

In a recent American Association of Retired Persons publication, Smith (1986:4) states:

> The last of the baby-boom generation has completed full-time study. The applicant pool of 18-22 year-olds is decreasing, while the older population continues to increase. Each day in the United States, the over 65 population grows by 1,600 or almost 600,000 per year.

The type of demographic shift noted by Smith and others should be of special concern to community college personnel. It is no secret that most community colleges depend heavily upon enrollment numbers in their funding formulas. With a declining pool of youth to draw from, the older adult (over fifty-five) student could become a very significant part of future community college populations. It follows then that community colleges need to be especially concerned about what can be done to serve the needs of this burgeoning older adult population.

What follows is a literature review aimed at determining the needs of this population and the courses which some community colleges have or are presently offering to meet those needs. The literature examined was gleaned from various sources but is for the most part confined to selected documents written since 1980. Hopefully, this review will

facilitate thinking and planning in institutions which have not yet considered this potential group of students.

One area of need expressed by older adults might best be termed "personal business and financial information needs." Mainly, the need here is for information and understanding about related topics. In interviews conducted for Flathead Valley Community College in Kalispell, Montana, Becker (1980:3-4) notes senior citizen interest in social security programs, pensions, food stamps, veteran's benefits, rental assistance, consumer problems, and legal assistance. This is only a partial listing, but it provides some idea of the practical kinds of information some older adults need.

A second area somewhat related to the previous one involves employment needs of some older adults. Yoselaff and others (1987:1) of Middlesex County College, Edison, New Jersey, comment on the job needs they discerned among older students:

> It appeared that while longevity and good health for retirees were increasing so too was the loss of their jobs. Company mergers and acquisitions, increased benefits costs to employers, and the change in local industry from manufacturing to service caused displacement within this same group.

The author's comment about the shift from a

manufacturing to a service economy is of significance; this does not appear to be an isolated trend. It is likely there will be similar "displacements" in other communities across American in the years ahead.

Employment needs are also the focus of a study conducted by Nielsen and Geyer (1986:10) at De Anza College in Cupertino California. Their survey results (listed from most frequently requested to least) indicate older adult interest in several areas: fast food industry, computers, cable T.V. production, clerical/secretarial, polling attendants, child day care services, neighborhood watch program, and telephone solicitation.

For older adults, the ability to remain physically mobile is important. Forman (1986:6) of De Anza College comments on this third area of need:

> Indeed physical education is probably the most beneficial educational program that older individuals can experience because it helps them maintain their mobility and independence, two factors that greatly influence an individual's self concept.

Smith (1986:7) in the AARP publication agrees and suggests that physical education and health classes can help the older adult maintain "a sense of control or coping." Epstein (1988:16) at Northern Virginia Community College reports survey results showing

"health and travel" as two of the most popular topics.

A physically able older adult can better enjoy social interaction, a fourth type of need. Pierce (1980:6) writing of the Institute of Study for Older Adults, a branch of New York City Technical College, states students' "motivations for taking courses" involved a need for knowledge and social interaction. Likewise, Murphy (1980:4-5) of San Francisco's Pacific Heights Community College paraphrases another authority on the importance of social interaction: "One well-known gerontologist has stated that as important as the education itself is the sociability that takes place in the classroom."

The final two areas of need are closely related. They are maintaining positive self-esteem and having a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Of the self-esteem topic, Davisson and Rush (1981:19) observe:

> Most older adults are mobile and in good health, yet many retired people experience role losses that exclude them from society. Because there are no particular goals established for older adults, they must find their own goals if they are to achieve a meaningful later life.

Also, Smith (1986:8) touches on the topic of self-esteem saying that "Intellectual and creative pursuits generate a sense of accomplishment and encourage self-esteem."

For older adults, having meaning and purpose in

life is especially important. Within the AARP booklet, Smith (1986:7) cites a 1981 National Center for Educational Statistics survey indicating that older persons most often take courses which provide: "A continued sense of meaning (e.g., through philosophy, religion, language and literature, and art courses - 39 percent of all courses taken)." Similarly, Kazemek and Rigg (1985:6), researchers in the area of adult literacy, offer this: "More important, many elders feel the need to order and reorder their lives, to make some sense of what has happened to them." Pierce (1980:6) also comments upon this topic as it can be focused by careful study of liberal arts classes:

> The student is aided in assessing the meaning of his life in relationship to what he or she knows of past history, literature, and the arts, and philosophic and religious belief systems.

For many older adult learners, this need becomes significant since the tasks of doing a job and rearing a family no longer provide the sense of purpose and meaning they once did.

So then, these are at least six areas of older adult need reflected in the literature reviewed. To restate briefly, the six areas are as follows: receiving information and help on personal business or financial matters; becoming employed either part-time

or full-time; maintaining physical fitness and mobility; interacting socially with others; maintaining self esteem; and having a sense of purpose in life. How these needs are being met is now the topic for consideration.

What follows is a sampling of classes found at institutions mentioned in the literature. The classes were generated to help senior citizens with personal business and financial concerns. Course offerings at the De Anza College Senior Workshop listed in a League for Innovation publication edited by Charles and Bartunek (1989:29) include "money management, health care, nutrition, and available community services." Yoselaff and others (1987:12) indicate that Middlesex County College, Edison, New Jersey offers a number of practical classes "from advocacy and health care to social security and understanding finances." Course listings for "Retirement Planning" at St. Louis Community College-Meramec include "Planning Your Retirement," "Housing Choices," "Legal Readiness," and "Financial Security" (Charles and Bartunek, 1989:35). A glance at these offerings suggests the utility of content for either the person who plans to retire or has already retired.

For the older adult seeking either full-time or

part-time employment, training opportunities can be as close as the local community college: indeed, this appears to be an area of senior citizen need that is being met by an increasing number of colleges. At De Anza College, Cupertino, California, retirees are trained for fast food industry jobs, various types of management posts, child care positions, and in-home care providers (Charles and Bartunek, 1989:9). Aronson and Eccles (1980:27) list three community colleges involved with job training for senior citizens: San Diego Community College's Jobs for Older Women program; Roane State Community College's Companion Health Aide Program; and Central Florida Community College's Handicraft Cooperative Program. Aronson and Eccles explain San Diego Community College's program as being one which "assists women trying to enter the job market through a mentor network of business and professional women who volunteer their services." Roane State Community College's program "trains individuals 55 years and older for employment as companions of elderly persons needing assistance to remain in their home." Central Florida Community College's thrust involves helping older adults identify "income producing activities for their low income peers." As the pool of older adults increases in the years ahead, programs and

offerings like those described here may very well develop at other community colleges.

In addition, the literature examined reveals computer course offerings; apparently, older adults enroll in such classes to meet personal business and/or employment needs. Charles and Bartunek (1989:21) highlight Rio Salado Community College, Sun City, Arizona and its "Computer Literacy Institute" centered upon the Apple IIe. Also, these two editors reference Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas as having two older adult computer courses: "Demystifying the I.B.M. Compatible Personal Computer" and "Demystifying the Apple II Computer" (1989:25).

That some community colleges are helping older adults remain physically active is evidenced several places in the literature. In 1981, Forman of De Anza College wrote "Adapting Physical Education Curriculum for the Older Adult." In his report, he asserts, "traditional Physical Education Curriculum does not meet the needs or consider the physical limitations of the older student" (Forman, 1981:1). In their League for Innovation publication, Charles and Bartunek (1989:9) list "Adaptive Physical Education" as a continuing campus offering at De Anza College, perhaps evidence of Forman's influence. Likewise, these same

editors include a listing for Delta College in Michigan which states, "Dance-exercise and swim therapy courses are constant and well attended, regardless of great competition from many sources in the area" (1989:11). St. Louis Community College's offering are described in this manner: "A variety of physical fitness and recreational activities are provided for older adults" (Charles and Bartunek, 1989:23). Last, Epstein (1986:16), writing of course offerings at Northern Virginia Community College Alexandria Campus, lists " `It's Never Too Late to Commit to Fitness' " as a course which has been taught.

Social interaction, the fourth need, is no doubt addressed by many of the classes previously described. This would be especially true of courses which prepare older adults for either volunteer or remunerated service to child care facilities and rest homes. Epstein (1988:16) cites a course at Northern Virginia Community College which was perhaps designed with the socializing function in mind, "Volunteering: Benefiting Yourself and the Community. Also, some courses in the "New Mature Woman" program at Rio Salado Community College, Sun City Arizona have socialization inherent in them: "Assertiveness Training," and "Human Sexuality for Mature Adults" (Charles and Bartunek, 1989:33). Besides

these courses, Rio Salado also provides half-day conferences on "Communication" and "Relationships" among other topics.

Like social interaction, self esteem, the fifth need, is surely accomplished through many of the classes previously described. Of the literature surveyed, self esteem appears to be central to many of Rio-Salado Community College's offerings. They list half day conferences in "Beauty," and "Self Esteem." Also, they list courses such as "Improve Your Appearance," "Eliminating Self-Defeating Behavior," and "Single Again" (Charles and Bartuneck, 1989:33).

Self esteem and the need for a sense of purpose or meaning in life often complement each other. Courses in literature and art can help the older adult discover new meaning in life. In an article "Tithes: Poetry and Old People," Kazemek and Rigg describe team-teaching a creative writing of poetry class at a senior citizen's center (geographic location not given). Of senior citizens, these authors say, "many elders feel the need to order and reorder their lives, to make sense of what has happened to them" (1985:6). In reordering and making sense of what has happened, the participants write about: "The same kind of universals that poets have always written about: birth, death, love, joy,

sorrow, family, and humankind's relationship to something greater than itself, be it Nature or God" (Kazemek and Rigg, 1985:6).

Along somewhat the same lines, art classes can enhance self esteem and foster purpose and meaning for the senior citizen. Davisson and Rush, in their article, "Older Adults as Art Students: An Unrealized Clientele for Community Colleges," comment about the visual arts and older adults: "Participation in art classes can help them to find identity and to acquire a positive self concept (1981:19). The authors include photos of older adults painting oil and watercolor pictures at a senior citizen's center in Tucson, Arizona which suggests their observations are based upon actual teaching experience. Drawing from their experience, these same authors assert that finding meaning in the arts for older adults may become "an integral factor in their survival" (1981:19). So, whether it be through literature, art, or some other discipline, older adults can and do discover new meaning and purpose in life, a need which for most does not wane with age.

In this analysis, needs of older adults have been identified through a careful reading of selected pieces of literature. Also, the readings suggest that some community colleges are meeting the personal business,

physical fitness, social interaction, self esteem, and sense of purpose needs of this population. In the years ahead, it is possible that other community colleges may begin to serve more completely the needs of older adults. The demographic information should prompt the careful consideration of community college leaders:

> Assuming a retirement age of 65, older persons can expect to live an additional 16.8 years. By the year 2000, persons over 65 are expected to represent 13 percent of the population and if current trends prevail, the only population group experiencing significant increases in the next century will be more than 55 years of age (Smith, 1986:4).

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